

Rules of the Game

Using Magic Items (Part Two)

By Skip Williams



Most difficulties with magic items arise from questions about just what a wielder has to do to use an item and exactly how often the user can use it. In Part One, we considered kinds of magic items in general and how you use them.

Activating Magic Items

Pages 211-215 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* explain item activation in detail, and the introductory text for the various kinds of items in Chapter 7 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* contains additional information. This section summarizes that material and offers some additional remarks.

Activating a magic item is a standard action unless the item description indicates otherwise. However, the casting time of a spell is the time required to activate the same power in an item, regardless of the kind of magic item or its activation method, unless the item description specifically states otherwise (see page 213 in the *Dungeon Masters Guide*). Potions (and oils) are an exception. Drinking a potion or applying an oil to yourself is always a standard action, no matter what the stored spell's casting time is. Administering a potion or oil to an unconscious ally is always a full-round action (see page 229 in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*).

When activating an item requires an action from you, you usually also must speak; the rules don't say so, but you reasonably can assume that doing so is much like completing a spell's verbal component. You must speak in a strong voice, and anything that keeps you from speaking, such as a *silence* spell or being pinned in a grapple, keeps you from activating the item.

Spell Completion: This is the activation method for scrolls. A scroll is a spell that is mostly finished. The item user must complete the spell's verbal and somatic components (if it has any), but does not need any material, focus, or XP components the spell might have. (The character who scribed the scroll provided those.)

To use a spell completion item safely, you must be of high enough level in the right class to cast the spell already. If you can't already cast the spell, there's a chance you'll make a mistake, as noted on page 238 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. To activate a spell trigger item with an arcane spell on it, you must have levels in a class able to cast arcane spells. Likewise, to activate a spell trigger item with a divine spell on it, you must have levels in a class able to cast divine spells. If you don't have enough levels in the class to cast any spells yet, you can still try to use a spell trigger item, but your effective caster level for activating the spell is 0.

If a scroll has a caster level higher than your own, you have to make a Spellcraft check ($DC = 1 + \text{the scroll's caster level}$) to activate the scroll. If you fail the check, you don't activate the scroll and the scroll isn't used up.

Activating a spell completion item usually is a standard action that provokes attacks of opportunity exactly as casting a spell does.

If the spell contained in a spell completion item has a casting time other than 1 standard action, that is its activation time. For example, a scroll containing a *summon monster I* spell has an activation time of 1 round because that's the casting time for the spell.

The rules don't say so (probably because it's an obvious point), but you must be able to see a scroll to read it. If you're blinded, you can't activate a scroll, and you also cannot do so if darkness, fog, or some other condition keeps you from seeing the scroll. Darkvision lets you see in nonmagical darkness, and that allows you to read scrolls in nonmagical darkness.

Whenever you activate a scroll, you still need to make any Concentration checks you'd normally need to make to cast a spell, and the spell on the scroll is wasted if you fail the check. For example, if you're damaged while activating a scroll, you must make Concentration check to cast the spell. You can activate a spell completion item defensively; the required Concentration check DC is the same as the DC to cast the spell. If you fail the check, the spell is wasted.

Spell completion items are also subject to arcane spell failure if you use them while armored. If you fail an arcane spell failure roll while using a spell completion item, the spell is wasted.

You can't activate a spell completion item if the spell stored in the item isn't on your class spell list or if your ability scores would not allow you to cast the stored spell. For example, a single-classed bard cannot cast a *fireball* spell from a scroll, because *fireball* isn't on the bard spell list (see the entry on spell trigger items for a discussion of class spell lists). Likewise, a wizard with an Intelligence score of 12 could not cast a *fireball* spell from a scroll because a wizard needs an Intelligence score of at least 13 to cast a 3rd-level spell.

Spell Trigger: This is the activation method for wands and staves. Activating a spell trigger item requires no gestures or spell finishing, but you must speak a single word, and you must hold the item in your hand (or what passes for your hand).

To use a spell trigger item, you must have the spell that is stored in the item on your class spell list. You can use the item even if you're not high enough level to cast the stored spell (or even high enough level to cast any spells at all). It doesn't make any difference if the stored spell is arcane or divine, and your ability scores don't matter.

See the *Player's Handbook* (or other appropriate rulebook) for your class spell list. If you have a prohibited school of spells (if you're a specialist wizard, for example), the spells from that school aren't part of your class spell list. If you have access to clerical spell domains, the spells in the domains you've chosen are on your class spell list (spells from domains you could have chosen, but did not, are not on your class spell list). If you're multiclassed, you can use a spell trigger item that stores a spell that is on at least one of your class spell lists.

If a spell trigger item stores more than one spell (for example, a staff), you may find that you can use only some of the item's functions.

Activating a spell trigger item is a standard action that does not provoke attacks of opportunity. If the spell stored in a spell trigger item has a casting time other than 1 standard action, that is its activation time.

Command Word: This is the default activation method for rings, rods, and wondrous items when the item description doesn't mention another activation method. To use a command word item, you speak the command word and the item activates. You need no other special knowledge, but you must hold or wear the item as appropriate for that item (see Part One).

Activating a command word magic item is a standard action and does not provoke attacks of opportunity. If a command word item produces a spell effect and that spell has a casting time other than 1 standard action, that is the item's activation time.

A command word usually is some seemingly nonsensical word, or a word or phrase from an ancient language no longer in common use. Sometimes the command word to activate an item is written right on the item. Occasionally, it might be hidden within a pattern or design engraved on, carved into, or built into the item, or the item might bear a clue to the command word.

As noted in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, the Knowledge (arcana) and Knowledge (history) skills might be useful in helping to identify command words or deciphering clues regarding them. A successful check against DC 30 produces the word itself. If you fail that check, succeeding on a second check (DC 25) might provide some insight into what the word might be. For example, a successful check to gain insight might indicate the sort of word the command might be, such as an ancient word for "fire" or a rhyming couplet related to the item's function.

You could possibly pick up a command word when you witness the item being used. I recommend a DC 15 Listen check. Subtract 5 from the DC if the area is fairly quiet and add 5 to the DC if the area is very noisy (such as a typical battle). Also apply the DC modifiers from the Listen skill description. If you have at least 5 ranks in the Spellcraft or Knowledge (arcana) skills, you get a +2 bonus on the check.

Remember that a command word item is pretty easy to use. These tricks won't help you figure out how to use a spell completion or spell trigger item.

The spells *identify* and *analyze dweomer* both reveal command words, as noted in the spell descriptions.

Some command-activated items use a command thought or other nonverbal command instead of command word (if so, the item description will say so). Such items work just like command word items in play, except that you can't make a Listen check to learn the command word. You might, however, pick up the command using a *detect thoughts* spell at the right moment or by making a Spot check, as appropriate for the item in question.

Use Activated: You simply use this type of item to activate it (for example, drinking a potion, swinging a sword, wearing armor, looking through a lens, sprinkling dust, or donning a hat). As noted in Part One, most protective items, and items that give you some sort of bonus on attacks, saves, or checks, are use-activated items.

Unless stated otherwise (and as stated in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*), activating a use-activated item is either a standard action or not an action at all and does not provoke attacks of opportunity, unless the use involves performing an action that provokes an attack of opportunity in itself. For example, a magic bow requires you to make a ranged attack, so you provoke an attack of opportunity when you make the ranged attack.

If the use of the item takes time before a magical effect occurs, then use activation is a standard action. If the item's activation is subsumed in its use and takes no extra time, use activation is not an action at all.

Use activation doesn't mean that you automatically know what an item can do if you use it. You must know (or at least guess) what the item can do and then use the item to activate it. Sometimes, the item activates automatically when you use it, such as when you drink a potion or swing a sword. In such cases, you can benefit from the item without even knowing it. Sometimes, you must attempt something specific to benefit from a use-

activated item. For example, if you wear *gloves of arrow snaring*, you can snatch arrows twice a day. You don't use an action to snatch the arrows, but unless you actually try to snatch an arrow the gloves don't work.

The Use Magic Device Skill

The Use Magic Device skill allows you to activate magic items even when you could not normally do so. For example, you can use it to activate a spell trigger item even when you don't have the spell it stores on your class spell list. You also can use the skill to activate a command item when you don't know the command or decipher the writing on a scroll and then activate the scroll (or other spell completion item) even when you otherwise could not.

Some people think that you need the Use Magic Device skill to activate any item, but that's not so. The Use Magic Device skill merely provides a sort of last resort when you want to use an item that you otherwise cannot activate.

The DC for a Use Magic Device check depends on the kind of item you're trying to use, as noted in the skill description. Here are a few additional notes for using the skill:

Blind Activation: You can use the "activate blindly" option with any kind of item. You can even use it to activate a command item when you don't know the command (or even what the device does). If you succeed, you activate the item somehow. Successful activation does not necessarily reveal the command to you, but you do get a +2 bonus on further attempts to activate the item blindly.

As an unofficial rule, you might allow a character who has activated an item blindly an immediate Knowledge check (see the section on command activation) with a base DC of 25. Give the character a cumulative circumstance bonus of +2 for each time the character has previously activated the item blindly. The character gets only one check for each blind activation. If the character doesn't have the appropriate Knowledge skill, the character makes an Intelligence check (with the previously noted circumstance bonus) instead.

The skill description doesn't say so, but there's no reason why you could not use blind activation when you don't know a spell trigger item's function. To use this unofficial rule, you must aim the item somewhere. If you aim at the wrong place, you might simply waste a charge from the item, or you might have a disaster on your hands (depending on what the item's effect is and exactly where you aimed). If the spell trigger item produces a visible effect, you probably can surmise what the spell is. Otherwise make a DC 25 Spellcraft check to determine what the spell is. If the effect is visible and your DM decides you might not know what it is, the check DC is only 20.

Decipher a Written Spell: This works just like deciphering a written spell with the Spellcraft skill, except that the DC is higher. Deciphering a written spell takes 1 minute. Remember that to use a scroll, you must first decipher the writing on it. Once you decipher the writing, you'll know what the spell is and what it does (at least as well as you know the spell if you had it in your spell book or in your personal spell repertoire).

What's Next?

That covers magic item activation pretty well. Next week, we'll consider items with limited uses, magic items that you must wear, and other aspects of magic items in play.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of ***Dragon Magazine*** for 18 years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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